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ABSTRACT

Research on feedback acceptance in sensitivity groups has consistently found that subjects rate positive feedback more credible than negative, a phenomenon referred to as the "credibility gap." To assess subjective distortion versus actual differences in credibility as an alternative explanation for the different ratings given positive and negative feedback, the ratings of recipients, i.e., subjects who participated in sensitivity groups and received positive and negative feedback, were compared with those of observers, i.e., subjects who observed the sensitivity groups and the feedback on videotape. Analyses of the results suggested that both factors were responsible for the "credibility gap." Both recipients and observers rated positive feedback more credible than negative; however, recipients rated their positive feedback more credible and their negative feedback less credible than observers did. The findings point to the questionable value of negative feedback in eliciting behavior change. (Author/MCF)

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CREDIBILITY GAP: SUBJECTIVE DISTORTION OR ACCURATE ASSESSMENT

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Introduction

Feedback refers to the process by which an individual is informed of the reaction of others to his behavior. Research on feedback acceptance in sensitivity groups has consistently reported that positive feedback, i.e., information regarding behavioral assets, is rated more credible than negative feedback, a phenomenon referred to as the "credibility gap" (Jacobs, 1974). This highly stable result has been demonstrated whether the feedback is genuine or counterfeit (Schaible, 1970), emotional or behavioral (Jacobs, Jacobs, Feldman, and Cavior, 1973) whether or not the source of the feedback is know (Jacobs, Jacobs, Cavior, and Burke, 1974), whether positive or negative feedback is received first (Jacobs, Jacobs, Gatz, and Schaible, 1973), and when the subjects (Ss) knew each other only briefly (one hour) as well as when they had worked together intensively for six weeks as members of a group treatment team in group psychotherapy (Jacobs, 1974).

An assumption of the research mentioned above concerning the "credibility gap" phenomenon has been that the different ratings for positive and negative feedback are distortions rather than accurate perceptions of the actual credibility of the feedback. However, no data substantiating this assumption exists. When one notes the wide variety of situations under which, as well as the large numbers of variables for which this effect has been demonstrated, the possibility that the ratings are an accurate reflection of the

actual credibility of the feedback cannot be overlooked. In support of the proposition that the positive feedback received in such groups may actually be more accurate than the negative, it can be argued that Ss in such sensitivity groups tend to dissimulate, i.e., attempt to make a good impression, and thus exhibit little behavior warranting negative feedback. Further, social learning from an early age is geared to fostering appropriate, desirable, prosocial behavior and discouraging the opposite. Thus, it is entirely possible that little behavior warranting negative feedback and much behavior warranting positive feedback occurs in such groups. With little behavior occurring upon which negative feedback could be based, and in a situation where Ss are forced to give both positive and negative feedback, it follows that the different ratings assigned positive and negative feedback could adequately reflect the actual credibility of such feedback.

The present study assessed the relative contributions of subjective distortion and/or actual credibility differences to the "credibility gap" phenomenon by comparing the credibility ratings for positive and negative feedback by recipients, i.e., by groups of Ss who participated in sensitivity groups and received positive and negative feedback, with ratings for that feedback by observers, i.e., by groups of Ss who observed but did not participate in the sensitivity groups and who did not receive feedback. Since they have no personal stake in the feedback, observer groups should provide norms for the credibility of each type of feedback that are relatively free of subjective distortions. If the different ratings given positive and negative feedback by recipients is due to actual differences in the credibility of such feedback, then no differences should be found between the ratings of that feedback by observers and recepients, both of whom should rate

positive feedback more credible than negative. To the contrary, the subjective distortion hypothesis would predict no difference in the crediblility ratings for positive and negative feedback by observers. Thus, the study simultaneously tests the appropriateness of the two competing hypotheses as explanations for the data.

Of course, a third possibility is that both subjective distortion and accuracy of assessment could account for the different ratings assigned the feedback. If that were the case, then an interaction effect reflecting the relative contribution of each factor should result. In such an instance, both recipients and observers would rate positive feedback more credible than negative. However, one of three possible additional outcomes should result: 1.) recipients might rate negative feedback lower than observers, suggesting defensiveness on the part of recipients when receiving negative feedback; 2.) recipients might rate positive feedback higher than independent observers, suggesting enhancement of ratings due to some factor akin to ego inflation; or 3.) recipients might rate negative feedback lower and positive feedback higher than independent observers, suggesting the presence of both defensiveness and ego inflation.

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 40 undergraduate students, 20 females and 20 males, Each had chosen to earn additional credit toward a course grade by either participating in or observing a three-hour sensitivity group session. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of four groups, two participant groups and two observer groups, subject to their availability at the time for which the group was scheduled. Each of the four groups had an equal number of males and females. All groups were co-led by an experienced clinical psychologist and a graduate psychology student.

Procedure. Subjects in the participant groups experienced a series of exercises, during which they were videotaped. The exercises were designed to insure adequate interpersonal contact and to generate behavioral data on which feedback could be based. The format for both participant groups was identical until the first feedback session. A summary of the 3-4 hour program follows: Group members introduced themselves and gave a little background information about themselves. Then, each member related current hobbies and interests. After this, each participant selected an animal or a building that she or he considered representative of self and shared the perceived similarities with the group. At this point, the NASA exercise was presented to the group as a problem requiring first solution by each individual and then solution as a group. Both solutions were arrived at in the absence of the group leaders. The NASA exercise required the members to rank order 15 miscellaneous items of equipment relative to their survival value for a group stranded on the moon.

Following the NASA exercise, the participants selected 2 items of feedback for each group member. One member at a time served as the recipient of feedback which was given verbally by every other member. The recipient recorded the first 2 items of feedback received on a recording form. After all members had received feedback, the items recorded were rated for credibility using a 9-point scale.

The second major exercise in the session was an imaginal-fantasy exercise called "Ten years from now", in which members were asked to project themselves 10 years into the future and then to relate what they imagined to the group. Following this exercise, the feedback procedure was repeated.

During one feedback session all Ss exchanged postive feedback, while during the other they exchanged negative feedback.

In the observation groups, a video-tape of the sensitivity group session was shown, and each observer was instructed to pay attention to the behavior of a member of the participant group, each pairing being same-sex. After viewing the first feedback session, the observers were asked to rate the feedback received by the person that they were observing for credibility. Following the second feedback session, observers again rated the feedback that their "person" received for credibility. This completed the research part of the group experience.

All groups were then provided with a structure free period during which Ss could ask questions, exchange further feedback, take care of unfinished business, or do anything else that the earlier structured nature of the group experience might have prevented.

Results

A 2 x 2 analysis of variance with repeated measures yielded a significant main effect for valence ($F = 81$, $df = 1/38$, $p < .0001$), with positive feedback rated once again more credible than negative. The means, on a scale from 1 to 9, were 7.39 for positive and 4.02 for negative respectively. A significant interaction effect between level of involvement and valence of the feedback was also obtained ($F = 10.32$, $df = 1/38$, $p < .01$). A Duncan multiple range test indicated that recipients rated their positive feedback more credible ($p < .01$) and their negative feedback less credible ($p < .05$) than observers did. Both observers and recipients rate positive feedback more credible than negative ($p < .01$). The means for the above differences appear in Table 1. There was no significant difference in the overall ratings for the feedback by recipients and observers.

Table 1

Mean Credibility Ratings for Positive and Negative Feedback by Recipients and Observers

Level of Participation	Feedback Valence	
	Positive	Negative
Recipient	8.16	3.58
Observer	6.61	4.64

Scores could range from 1 to 9 with a higher score indicating greater credibility.

Note. All means are significantly different.

Discussion

The results indicate that the "credibility gap" is due to both actual differences in, and subjective distortions of the credibility of positive and negative feedback. The data suggests that positive feedback is probably, in most cases, less credible than negative. The finding that uninvolved observers rate positive feedback more credible than negative clearly supports this conclusion. Their personal involvement in the experience is minimal, so assuming that their ability to det ct positive and negative traits is about equal, one would expect no differences in their ratings for the two types of feedback.

Clearly indicated also is that Ss distort the feedback that they receive. They tend to disbelieve statements concerning personality deficits and place excessive credence in statements regarding personality assets. Needed is research identifying the psychological variables, i.e., cognitive dissonance, defensiveness, etc., responsible for these distortions, as well as identification of factors which would tend to reduce distortions. The above finding raises an interesting point. Since feedback is distorted by recipients, in some cases it may lead to a poorer, rather than a better understanding of an individual's personality strengths and weaknesses.

The "credibility gap" calls into question, what, if any, value negative feedback has in eliciting behavior change since, if recipients do not believe their negative feedback, it is unlikely that they will utilize it to enhance their interpersonal effectiveness. Given the cost and time involved in running sensitivity groups, it may be that other means of providing negative feedback such as personality tests would prove to be more effective. Suggested is some assessment of the credence that Ss place in psychological

test results as opposed to feedback from fellow group members and assessment of the comparative reliability and validity of each procedure in terms of its ability to correctly identify personality characteristics or behaviors which form the basis of feedback. In other words, does feedback based on group interactions represent a more accurate evaluation than test results of the individual as he really is or vice versa?

That observers likewise rate negative feedback less credible cautions that, in sensitivity groups where negative feedback is to be exchanged, efforts should be made to insure that sufficient behavior warranting negative feedback has taken place. Further, techniques which enhance acceptance of negative feedback need to be developed. One possible way of achieving this is, whenever possible, to rephrase negative statements in positive terms, e.g., assertive instead of pushy, a good listener instead of too quiet, sexually adventurous instead of promiscuous, or verbally fluent instead of talks too much, followed by some suggestion of experimenting with the opposite behavior for the sake of increasing one's behavior repertoire.

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